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Advanced Guide: Christian Morality

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The Bible, and the God who has revealed himself in its pages, provides the only adequate basis for morality. I want to show you how to explain the concept of morality in a biblical way, and to bring the conversation around to the biblical Gospel.

Answering A Common Objection

Often when engaging in conversation with skeptics, you'll hear the argument that the God of the Bible is immoral--especially in the Old Testament. Or, you'll hear that current Christian positions on social issues such as homosexuality ("gay rights") or abortion ("a woman's right to choose") are backward and downright wrong.

These are accusations dealing with morality. The study of morality is the study of mores, rules about right and wrong. To answer questions about morality is deal with ethical obligations and proscriptions--of right or wrong thought and action. We're talking about what people *should* and *should*

not do.

The question of developing a Christian view of *morality* is bound up with the question of other fields of study, including axiology (values) and aesthetics (judgments of beauty).

These three--morality, axiology and aesthetic--all concerned with the question of goodness. And the real question is whether such a thing as absolute goodness exists. Is there a reference point for goodness, by which all judgments of goodness or badness are themselves to be judged?

After we see that there *is* in fact an absolute standard of goodness, then we can ask, “What are our moral duties and how do we know?” as well as, “What does it mean to violate the absolute standard of goodness?” and, “Is beauty objective or merely in the eye of the beholder?” If there is an absolute standard by which we may make sense of morality, then we may also make sense of related fields of study.

Determining the reference point for all goodness is absolutely necessary before judging any goodness at all. It’s also necessary for judging any claims about morality and immorality. This includes claims made by the skeptic, accusing God (whether in the Old Testament or New) of acting immorally.

So this is why the skilled apologist will often ask a very simple question when confronted with this question: “Immoral by what standard?”

God is the Basis for Morality

Morality cannot be subjective. If it were, we would only be talking about *preferences*, not morality. There would only be what *is*, meaning there would be my preference, and your preference, and their preferences, but no bridge between them and no scale on which to weigh them, no way to judge between them.

So morality must be objective, which is to say it must be absolute. Absolute morality requires a basis in an absolute prime reality. This prime reality must be absolute as well as personal. This is because moral duties are laws, and laws require a lawgiver. A lawgiver cannot be an impersonal force (e.g. gravity) or abstract object (e.g. the number four) but must be personal, someone who can make the pronouncement, “This is how things *ought* to be.” Absolute, unchanging laws require an absolute and unchanging Lawgiver. Certain non-biblical worldviews, which present a concept of God that is unitarian (absolute oneness) could perhaps account for absolute, unchanging laws, if they merely applied to an individual person interacting with himself.

Yet moral principles do not just deal with individuals but also govern relationships between individuals. Much of morality covers how people ought to treat one another. In the study of morality we are concerned not merely with unity but also with diversity. We are concerned with how individuals ought to treat one another in their relationships and interactions with each other. This is a question not merely of absolute unity but of diversity too.

In order to account for the existence of absolute moral standards that govern interpersonal relationships, the prime reality in which they are grounded must also be absolute, personal and *interpersonal*.

One of the core doctrines of Christian theism is that God is Triune--the Father Son and Holy Spirit are three divine persons, perfectly united in absolute loving harmony. And this has been the nature of God since literally forever. This means that God is interpersonal in his very being. God is relational within himself.

As it turns out, this interpersonal attribute that God has is completely essential for grounding morality, which deals both with our obligations toward God *and our obligations toward one another* as fellow persons (made as we are in his image).

There must be a relational attribute to God, or else any of moral standards for interpersonal relationships would merely be arbitrary.

For example, if God were a monad, as the unitarian religions (Judaism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, etc.) believe, then prior to him creating, there would have been no interpersonal relationships at all. Any moral requirements such a God would have decreed would be the creations of his mind, but would not have been rooted in God's own relational nature, since prior to creating God would have had no relationships.

It follows that, for absolute interpersonal moral standards to *be* absolute, they must be rooted in a prime reality (God) who is infinite without division (unbroken oneness), and yet diverse and personal within himself, such that he the divine persons (who are one God, unbroken and undivided) enjoy communion between themselves that is perfectly loving and moral. God's nature, as revealed in Scripture, is such a prime reality.

On the biblical view, the God who grounds reality is interpersonal and perfectly loving and moral within himself.

Only biblical Christian theism has this view of God, and therefore only Christianity provides an adequate basis for morality--for objective, universal laws governing interpersonal relationships and interactions.

There are many worldviews, religions and philosophies in the world, yet only one worldview that has such a concept of God, and that is biblical Christianity. As Francis Schaeffer has said, the Christian answer is not merely a good answer, it is the *only* answer.

Only biblical Christianity accounts for all three.

God's Nature Is the Standard for Morality

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit have known and loved one another perfectly forever in perfect, infinite oneness, so it makes sense when Scripture says that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). His very nature is love. His loving nature is the basis for how the three Persons of the Trinity relate to one another, and it forms the basis for his moral commands to his creatures.

Therefore God's moral commands are not arbitrary, nor does he appeal to some standard beyond himself. The Greek Philosopher Plato wrestled with this, because he only knew the gods of mythology. Yet God is not like those “gods.” God's very nature is the definition of goodness. He is magnificent, glorious and eminently praiseworthy, and he commands that his creatures live by his glorious standard (Mark 10:18). God's goodness was reflected in his creation as he originally created it (Genesis 1:31).

God, the infinite, tri-personal, relational God who is love, is perfectly moral, infinitely valuable, and gloriously beautiful. All the fields of study related to goodness find their basis and ultimate reference point in him; things are good, valuable and beautiful insofar as they are like God, who is all good, valuable and beautiful to the nth degree.

God's Revelation Makes His Moral Laws Accessible

Recall that God's nature is personal, infinite, and diverse within himself. This provides the basis for absolute morality. Because he is personal, he has a will. Because he is infinite, his will applies to all people, everywhere and at all times.

And because he is tri-personal, it is in his nature to communicate. He has revealed our moral obligations to us, both in creation and in his word, the Bible.

God's creation communicates his glory (Psalm 19), to the extent that men have enough knowledge about God to glorify him and give him thanks, and therefore we are without excuse for failing to do so (Romans 1:18-24). Failing to fulfill even this basic requirement, man goes on to sin in various ways throughout life, falling short of God's glorious standard in every area of life (Romans 3:23).

Although man was originally created good, the first man sinned, and all his children have been sinning ever since, suppressing what can be known about God from the world without and the moral sense within. However the moral sense, the conscience, does remain. The Bible says the “works of the law” are written on the hearts of all people, and their, “competing thoughts either accuse or even excuse them” (Romans 2:15).

The second way God communicates his absolute moral standards to us is by the Bible. The Bible teaches that creation’s greatest purpose is to praise God (Ps. 148:1-14), and man’s highest moral duty is to love God (Mt. 22:38; Jn. 14:15), followed by the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Mt. 22:38-39).

In the Old Testament we read of his moral laws in his covenant with his people Israel, which covenant was established through Moses. In the New Testament we have a new lawgiver, the greater Moses, Jesus Christ.

The Ten Commandments (Old Covenant) were a baseline summary for the nation of Israel, and Jesus Christ deepened and expanded God’s moral teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7, pertaining to the New Covenant) and elsewhere.

The teachings of Christ are impossible to fulfill in man’s natural, sinful condition, which is bleak indeed. Because God is good, he must give sin what it deserves.

An Objection: Morality Need Not Be Absolute

Some will say that morality need not be absolute for it to be real. As an example, I recently heard a debate on the “Unbelievable?” program in which atheist Matt Dillahunty posited that morality boiled down to a kind of pragmatism. E.g. “If you want outcome A, you *ought* to do action B.”

The implication is that doing B is the best way to bring about A. However, this is very insufficient. Here’s why.

At the most basic level, this objection comes down to a kind of word game. “Ought” is being used here not as a moral obligation, but simply as a statement of what action presumably leads to a particular conclusion. It’s like saying, “if you do B, A will result.” Example: “If you drop this bowling ball, it will hit the ground.” That really doesn’t carry any ethical or moral obligation--any “oughtness”--with it. So we’re really not talking about morality or obligations at all.

But then, say the skeptic objects that, no, a person is *actually* obligated to take an action that is aimed at bringing about one's desired outcomes. Well his saying such requires an assumption that integrity between a person's desires and actions is a *good* thing.

And actually, we all recognize this to be true, don't we? Someone who says they desire something, but does actions that will never lead to that outcome, we call them foolish or hypocritical. So a guy who says he wants to get in shape, but he stays up late every night watching Netflix and pounding ice cream and salami, that person is foolish and hypocritical.

But the idea of not being foolish and not being a hypocrite being *good*, this is a Christian idea. It's the Bible that condemns folly and hypocrisy. You can't get there from skepticism, which provides no basis either for the existence of moral laws (because no lawgiver), nor an epistemological basis-- a basis for us coming to know about moral obligations (because no lawgiver speaking to us about them).

Three Components to Morality

Moral thought and action, then, is thought and action that is in accord with God's nature (revealed in his word), and love toward his creation (all creation, but especially other image bearers, since benevolence toward other image bearers is as close as we can get to benevolence toward God, in terms of his creation), and what is in accordance with conscience.

I haven't talked about conscience yet, but this is the corollary to our being made in God's image.

In Romans 2, when Paul mentions the "work of the law" being written on hearts, he also states that our conscience bears witness to what is right. So God has given us a conscience as an internal guide. As Christians we are not to violate our conscience (cf. 1 Cor. 8:10).

Our consciences are marred by sin, and the conclusions the conscience must be judged by Scripture, which is perfect.

Of course, the sad reality is that there is not a person on earth alive today who has ever perfectly upheld God's morality. Man is an immoral creature by nature. And we've earned sin's wages.

Immoral man's predicament

The “wages” of sin, the Bible teaches, is death (Romans 6:23). Man’s predicament, then, is that by living life in disobedience to God, he is choosing death. The disconnect between God’s perfectly good nature and law and man’s current immoral state is so deep and vast that it would be completely impossible for man to be restored to a right relationship with God apart from divine intervention.

Man is in the predicament of having an inner moral sense which drives him to desire moral goodness, while at the same time being morally incapable in his nature of choosing the good and pleasing God (Romans 8:8).

God’s (Moral) Solution

Because God’s character is perfectly good, the only way he could reconcile (immoral) mankind to himself would be by maintaining his righteous standard.

In this Gospel of Jesus Christ, we see exactly how he does this. He has Jesus, who is perfectly good and absolute in his nature, take on the punishment for man’s moral deficiencies and disobedience. God imputes Christ with our sin; our sin is credited to Christ. Christ died, which was now *fair*, because of the sin credited to him (though he himself never committed a sin), and God’s just standard is upheld. Then Christ rose, and since he had already paid the penalty for sin, there was now no more condemnation for that sin.

This is why the Bible contains these two passages:

Romans 3:25-26: God presented him as an atoning sacrifice[a] in his blood, received through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 8:1-2: Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you[b] free from the law of sin and death.

So you see God maintained his perfectly moral standard, while taking care of the moral requirement necessitated by our immorality. And today anyone who repents (turns from immorality) and trusts in Jesus will be justified (declared moral) on the basis of Christ.

Therefore, instead of God being *immoral* in Scripture, quite the opposite is true. He is the epitome of morality, and the very standard by which one must appeal to in order to judge any moral claims at all.

The accusation of God's immorality is done away with. When you encounter it, just remember the Christian view of morality is rooted in God's character, and a discussion of God's morality naturally leads to a presentation of the good news of the Gospel. That's really where we want to take the conversation anyway. Discussing morality is just a means to that end